

Chautare

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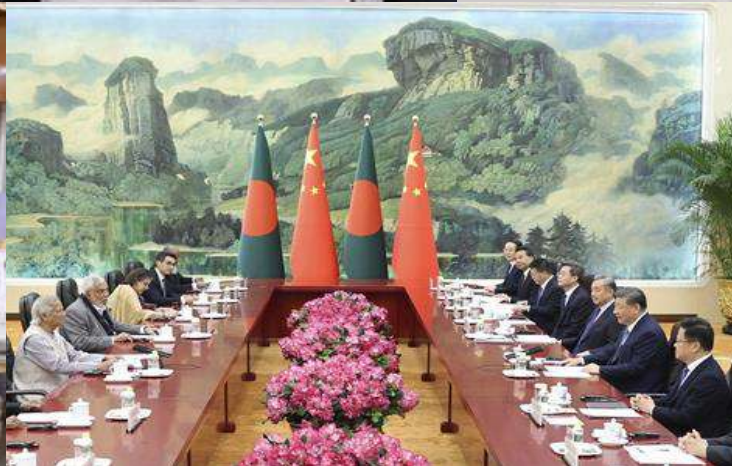
THE RESEARCH & INFORMATION JOURNAL
TRAVEL NEWS, DOCUMENTARIES & PUBLICATIONS



COVER STORY

The Game Begins

India-Bangladesh-Myanmar
emerge as new hotspots of
geopolitics



SPECIAL REPORT

KING'S GAMBIT

Kanak Mani Dixit:
Monarchy's return can
make Nepal a Hindu *rashtra*



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SOFT LANDING

Sourabh Sen:
North East Tour Operators
Urge Seamless Entry



CHAUTARE

Stories From Our Himalayan Neighbourhood



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April marked the fourth edition of *Chautare*. The month of April marks some rather interesting and important days. The first one is April Fool's Day. April 18th marks World Heritage Day, 19th was Husband Appreciation Day while April 22nd was Earth Day. The theme for Earth Day this year was Our Power, Our Planet.

Earth Day began in the late 1960s as a grassroots movement with the first event taking place in 1970, inspired by environmental concerns and protests. Earth is the only home we have. The theme for [Earth Day 2025](#) is [Our Power, Our Planet](#), inviting everyone around the globe to unite behind renewable energy and to triple the global generation of clean electricity by 2030. Together we can make the earth a greener and a cleaner home to live in.

This issue features some interesting news and articles from the region and beyond. Our neighbourhood is getting restive. Bangladesh is at the cusp of world power politics, with each player looking after its own narrow interest. There was violence in Kathmandu where the former king expressed his desire to rule again. Such developments impact our lives; they impact the way we lead our lives and also reveals how interconnected we all are. Explaining these issues are some of the finest minds of our times.

We hope you will enjoy reading them as much as we did. ●

(Rejoinder: In the Know your Member section of the March issue of *Chautare*, Mr. Birendra Tamling was described as “vice-president of the SKP” when it should read “vice-president of the SKM.” The inadvertent error is regretted — Editor.)



Born in 1955 into a traditional Bengali family, Ajoy Roy took up photo journalism in 1975. He was appointed a cameraperson in Business India TV, the first news channel in India, in 1994, and went on to work as a producer and cameraperson with Associated Press Television News from 1995. He has also been involved with reputed television channels in India and abroad such as BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera, Fox and NHK, and participated as a photojournalist and cameraperson at three World Cup Football events and two Olympic games. For several years, he produced *Bishwa Barta*, the first international news in Bengali for the Bengali News Channel Aakash Bangla.

A keen interest to look beyond mere news and a love for nature initiated Roy to take up documentaries. He devotes years to each of his documentaries, and works through revisits in order to capture the real evolution of his subjects. His longest association, however, remains with the painter Shahabuddin — a close friend and confidant — whose journey he has followed over the past 25 years from close quarters across continents. *Colour of Freedom* (2016) is the final product of that long journey. ●

A SELECT LIST

Let there be light (1988)
Celebration of Freedom (1994)
Indian Great Famine (1996)
Roots & Wounds (1999)
Sadhana (2002)
Bagdad in Distress (2003)
Glimpse of My Feelings (2004)
In Search of Happiness, ARD
Germany (2005)
My Home My Land, MANAS (2005)
Way to Go (2008)
Beyond Barriers (2009)
Aamar Sundarban (2009)
Tales of a Tribe (2010)
Royalty of Royal Bengal Tigers (2012)
Tales of Teesta (2013)
Tales of Tiger Land (Best Film Award in Pune International Film Festival 2015)
Shahabuddin — Colour of Freedom (2016)
Documentary — Indian Oil, Assam.
Documentary — Indian Fishery Development Board.
ICZM Documentary — (2018)
Documentary — CMS, Multi-Super Specialty Hospital, Kerala (2019)

Red Panda Festival Promotes Nepal's Sandakpur

April 2, Ilam: The Second Red Panda Trekking Festival got underway here today to promote the Sandakpur region as an eco-tourism destination while encouraging local participation, cross-border tourism and conservation awareness. Organized by Sandakpur Rural Municipality, Ilam, and Kechana-Kangchenjunga Tourism Development Committee, Tourism Office, Kakarvitta, the festival ended on April 5.

The festival turned out to be more than just a trek — it was a deep dive into the highland beauty of eastern Nepal, where nature, culture and conservation came together on a single trail. Held across the districts of Ilam and Panchthar, the four-day journey gave participants an opportunity to witness the rich biodiversity of the region, experience the Himalayan lifestyle and, most importantly, encounter the elusive Red Panda in its natural habitat.

The trail led through rhododendron forests, peaceful yak pastures, sacred springs and culturally vibrant villages. While the experience was visually and emotionally enriching, it also raised important concerns about the balance between tourism and ethical conservation. The unregulated nature of red panda sightings and commercial interest around them served as a reminder that protection efforts must evolve

alongside growing attention.



The festival was not just a walk-through trail, it was a journey through landscapes, lives, and layers of meaning. From the Himalayan ridgelines to bamboo-filled forests, every step carried the trekkers deeper into nature's untouched realm. One can experience high-altitude ecosystems where rhododendrons painted the forests and the mist shifted with the wind. The cold air, the steep ascents and the crisp silence of the early mornings added to the adventure; but it was the unexpected moments — the sighting of a rare bird, the sounds of the forest, or a conversation in a kitchen by a wooden stove — that made this trek different.

There were a diverse range of birds, their calls echoing through the trees, from high-flying raptors to small, colourful species fluttering among bamboo groves. The wildlife experience extended beyond the Red Panda; it was a whole web of life, breathing and thriving in these forests.

Culturally too, the trail told a story. From Sherpa households to Limbu traditions, each village had its own rhythm, its own language of hospitality. Food, dialect, dress, and belief systems shifted as one moved through settlements, reminding one that conservation was not just ecological it was also deeply social and cultural. The festival also aimed to establish communication and trust between villagers and policymakers and increase the participation of locals in decision-making.

Arunachal Villages Embrace Responsible Tourism

April 6, Shergaon: A two-day Responsible Tourism Meet organized by the Department of Tourism, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, deliberated on sustainable and responsible tourism practices rooted in local culture, ecology and community involvement. The meet brought together key tourism stakeholders, government officials, community representatives and NGOs from Arunachal Pradesh and other northeastern states. During the meet, interactive sessions were held with homestay and farm stay owners, members of village councils and NGOs — including members of NGO Zgang Depga from Jigaon — who shared insights on their Project Granjo (Cherry Blossom Tree Sponsorship Programme).

Exhibitions hosted on the sidelines of the meet showcased weaving products by SHG members and highlighted community achievements from Shergaon. Villages and communities that have initiated responsible tourism practices — such as Gobuk and Simong (Upper Subansiri), Labokore (Shi-Yomi), Chullyu (Keyi Panyor) and villages



from Tirap, Changlang, and Longding — actively participated in the event, sharing their efforts and success stories.

The programme also included visits to local

landmarks such as the Garung Thuk Community Library, the State Horticulture Farm, the Trout Hatchery, the Kamcho Yami (Thungi Gonpa) Rhododendron Garden, the Zengbu Gonpa, the Sacred Groves, the Yokmuzor Buddha Park and the Chillipam Gonpa.

Tourism Director Manjunath R., Deputy Director Bengia Manna Sonam, waste management expert Ranju G. Barman, Indo-Bhutan Friendship Association coordinator Soham Chakraborty, Advisor on Rural Tourism & Homestay to GoAP Raj Basu, Culture & Development Specialist Madhura Dutta, and Head of CX at Hindustan Times, Saurabh Shukla attended the meet. District tourism officers, members of the Arunachal Pradesh Tour Operators Association (APTOA) and tourism stakeholders from Meghalaya were present. NGO Garung Thuk Chairman Ledo Thungun, Vice-Chairman D.K. Thungun and member Lobsang Tashi Thungun were also in attendance.



IP Can Drive Growth: CII

April 29, New Delhi: ACT members attended CII's 15th Global Innovation & Intellectual Property Summit which saw the release of a report on Evaluation of Innovation Excellence Indicators of Public Funded R&D Organizations. The summit also marked the World

Intellectual Property & Innovation and Creativity day. The inaugural session provided a platform for a dialogue on how innovation and intellectual property could drive inclusive, sustainable and future-ready growth. The report unveiled at the event is a pioneering study highlighting the best practices and strategic actions to strengthen innovation, translational research and technology commercialization.

The plenary session featured Daren Tang, Director General of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), Professor Ajay Sood, Principal Scientific Adviser to the Government of India and Professor Unnat Pandit, Controller General of Patents, Designs & Trademarks.

Arunachal Deputy CM Inaugurates Dhamma Conclave

April 21, Namsai: Arunachal Pradesh Deputy Chief Minister Chowna Mein inaugurated the International Conclave on Buddha Dhamma and Culture of Northeast India today. Mein highlighted the cultural heritage and practices within the Buddhist communities. He also appreciated the leadership of Abhijit Halder, Director General of International Buddhist Confederation (IBC) in organizing the conclave and handed him over a beautifully-crafted statue of Lord Buddha as a token of appreciation. The statue was a part of the private collection of ACT member Venod Gupta of Darjeeling, who runs a souvenir shop at Bagdogra Customs Airport, mostly dealing with handicraft items from across the Himalayas.

Sikkim Governor Calls for Unity in Diverse Cultures

March 17, Gangtok: Sikkim Governor Om Prakash Mathur inaugurated the 8th North East Youth Festival 2025 at Paljor Stadium. Speaker Mingma Norbu Sherpa graced the occasion as guest of honour. This year's festival is themed Empowered Youth, Empowered Region — My Bharat, Viksit Bharat, featured the Red Panda, the state animal, as its mascot. The festival featured activities like solo guitar concerts, folk dances, one-act plays, quizzes and martial arts performances. The event, organized by the State Sports and Youth Affairs Department in collaboration with various national bodies, is expected to attract over 1,500 youth participants from across the North East.

In his inaugural address, Governor Mathur stressed the need for unity in diverse cultures, citing the festival



as a platform to honour the vibrant youth of the North East. He urged participants to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the festival for fruitful interactions and collaborations. The Governor recognized the role of Sikkim and North East youth in

education, sports and entrepreneurship, and asserted their crucial role in determining India's future.

The festival ended on March 20 with Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang presiding over the concluding session. In his keynote address, the Chief Minister highlighted his government's focus on entrepreneurship development to promote Sikkim's products beyond state boundaries. The Chief Minister also acknowledged Sikkim's commitment to nurturing regional athletes and artistic talent. Regarding the Eco Tourism sector, the Chief Minister discussed the opportunities it presents, given the region's breathtaking natural beauty.

Homestay Owners Urge Enhanced Service Quality

March 26, Darjeeling: The Darjeeling Homestay Owners Association (DHOA) celebrated its 8th Foundation Day at Gorkha Rangamanch Bhawan in Darjeeling, marking eight years of promoting sustainable and community based tourism in the region. Delegates engaged in discussions on the current tourism scenario, homestay policies, traffic congestion, waste management and solutions to these challenges which



aimed to enhance service quality and attract more tourists to the region.

Key delegates who attended were Executive member, GTA Tourism, Norden Sherpa, Vice President, Darjeeling Municipality, Prativa Rai, Project Director, DRDC, Sumedha Pradhan, Convenor of ACT and Chief Advisor of DHOA, Raj Basu, Secretary General, HHTDN,

Samrat Sanyal and representatives from all the homestay associations of the GTA region. All the guests were honored with thoughtfully curated gift hampers showcasing the region's handmade products crafted by local Self-Help Groups (SHG). DHOA announced the launch of souvenir shops in homestays. These shops will feature a collection of locally made products by the SHGs. Happy Valley Homestay will be the first to take this initiative of setting a souvenir shop within the homestay.

Sumedha Pradhan assured that products available through these shops will be genuine and also shed light on the biological integrity and traditional origins of these products. Through this campaign, DHOA will aim to enhance homestay experience, promote entrepreneurship, women empowerment and localization across the hills of Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts.

DHOA fondly remembered late Prashant Pradhan, one of its founding members. A memento was presented to honor and acknowledge his significant contribution to the establishment of DHOA. DHOA also felicitated two homestays, one each from Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts with the Best Homestay Award. Yuraj Pradhan of Vantage Point Homestay, Darjeeling, and Ongden Molumo of Molumo Homestay, Kalimpong, were the recipients. These homestays were awarded for their exceptional service and eco-friendly practices that thoughtfully reflect local cuisine, traditions and culture. The awards aim to inspire homestay owners to strive for excellence in their service. ●



The Great Game Begins

India-Bangladesh-Myanmar form the new arena of geopolitics

Yunus arriving in Beijing

Photo Credit: X/@ChiefAdviserGoB

Subir Bhaumik

DURING his four-day visit to China March 26–29, Bangladesh Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus urged Beijing to extend its economic influence to Bangladesh, adding that India's landlocked north-eastern states could be an opportunity for China. In a widely circulated video on social media, Yunus also encouraged the Chinese government to establish an economic base in Bangladesh, emphasizing that Dhaka was the "sole guardian of the ocean" in the region. Yunus, who met Chinese President Xi Jinping during his four-day trip and signed nine agreements with Beijing, said, "The seven states of India, the eastern part of India, are called the seven sisters. They are a landlocked region of India. They have no way to reach out to the ocean." Calling Bangladesh as the "only guardian of the ocean" (Bay of Bengal) in the region, he said this could be an extension of the Chinese economy.

While Yunus made the effort to go to Beijing to meet President Xi Jinping, he met his next-door neighbour Indian Prime Minister Modi on the sidelines of the BIMSTEC summit in Bangkok. The difference in optics was noted and commented upon by media in India and Bangladesh.

Yunus' projection of a landlocked northeast India and Bangladesh's "formidable" maritime presence as a possible "extension of the Chinese economy" did not amuse Delhi's officialdom. Nor did his pitch to award Chinese companies contracts on the Teesta river water project or a proposed airfield at Lalmonirhat, which is too close to the vulnerable Chicken's Neck (Siliguri Corridor). Bangladesh already has an air force station at Saidpur, in Rangpur Division. The proposed airfield at Lalmonirhat will be located around 70 km east of Saidpur and 16 km (as the crow flies) south of India-Bangladesh border.



Photo Credit: CA Press Wing of Bangladesh

Even as Dhaka went about wooing Beijing, New Delhi appeared to have hardened its position against Dhaka. It was not even trying to rein in Bangladesh's deposed Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, now sheltered in India. Nor has it responded to Yunus' request for Hasina's extradition. On April 7, Sheikh Hasina launched a fierce attack on Yunus and Bangladesh's interim government, blaming the Nobel laureate for turning "peaceful Bangladesh into a country of militants and terrorists."

According to Muhammad Yunus' press chief Shafiqul Alam, at the Modi-Yunus meet, Yunus made a specific request to Modi to restrain Sheikh Hasina from making provocative statements by misusing India's hospitality. But his claim that Yunus pushed for Hasina's extradition found no place in the Indian external affairs ministry's statement or in the foreign secretary's briefing in Delhi.

More than Sheikh Hasina's remarks per se, what makes them most interesting is that they came within less than a week after the much-touted Modi-Yunus summit meeting in Bangkok. This indicated that New Delhi was not interested in restraining her. Later, Indian officials expressed their displeasure over Alam making controversial claims in his verified Facebook page, describing them as "preposterous" and "plain lies."

A former diplomat argued that Alam would not be posting such remarks unless they were cleared by Yunus himself. It is no secret now that Bangladesh's interim government pushed hard for the Modi-Yunus meeting to happen. India took a long time to agree to the proposal. Some Indian officials were opposed to the meeting, arguing that it could extend legitimacy to an unelected interim government; meanwhile, others argued in favour "to convey our concerns at the highest level" — especially to drive home India's security concerns over the surging Islamist radicalism and the persecution of religious minorities in Bangladesh.

Apart from letting Hasina attack Yunus, on April 8 India revoked a 2020 circular that permitted transshipment of export cargo from Bangladesh to third countries using Indian Land Customs Stations (LCSs) en route to Indian ports and airports. This helped Bangladesh's exports to countries such as Bhutan, Nepal and Myanmar. This notification by the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) could potentially disrupt Bangladesh's trade with these three countries.

India-Bangladesh-US-China: Geopolitics at play

Bangladesh under Yunus appears to be doing a tight-rope walk. It is wooing China on one hand and engaging with the US on the other. The Chinese will be less than pleased if Yunus finally succumbs to US pressure to open Bangladesh's borders for a sustainable supply route to Myanmar's many rebel groups, especially in the Rakhine State. This is because Beijing does not want Burma's military junta to lose any further ground in the



Some Indian officials were opposed to the Yunus-Modi meeting in Bangkok, arguing that it could extend legitimacy to an unelected interim government

escalating civil war. Beijing has come out in open support of the junta and does not want to be blocked out of its land-to-sea access which any US-backed rebel formation in the coastal Rakhine state may deny.

The US discussed the supply route during Lt Gen JB Vowell's visit to Dhaka, as deputy commanding general for the US Army Pacific Command, March 24–25. Two senior US diplomats — deputy assistant secretary of state (South and Central Asia) Nicole Ann Chulick and deputy assistant secretary (East Asia and Pacific) Andrew Herrup — were in Dhaka April 15–18 to push the American agenda on Myanmar. The US charge d'affaires in Myanmar, Susan Stevenson, joined them, making it obvious that it was the Myanmar situation — and not so much of what is happening in Bangladesh — which was high on the US agenda.

India and US differ over Bangladesh and Myanmar

India and the US are somewhat divided over their priorities vis-a-vis Bangladesh and Myanmar.

India does not want the Burmese state or the army to fall apart but would wish to see a comprehensive dialogue that ends the civil war and leads to a restoration of democracy through elections, with the army going back to the barracks. Without peace returning to Myanmar, India's security and connectivity issues are less likely to be addressed. The US is perhaps looking for a total defeat of the Burmese army, leading to a collapse of the military junta and the creation of a confederation of independent states that would help its presence in the strategic underbelly of China.

But such a strategy will be similar to the US using Bangladesh in a way it used Pakistan to fight the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. A China-US proxy war in Myanmar which is likely to singe Bangladesh and its neighbourhood with understandable threat of escalation in the backdrop of the intensifying trade-tariff war, does not augur well for India and the region. ●



Lt. Gen. JB Vowell (right) met Bangladesh Army Chief General Waker-Uz-Zaman in Dhaka.

Bangladesh appears to be doing a tight-rope walk, wooing China on one hand and engaging with the US on the other



(Subir Bhaumik is a former BBC and Reuters correspondent and author on India's Northeast and its volatile neighbourhood. He has worked as Senior Editor with bdnews24.com in Dhaka and Mizzima media in Yangon. Bhaumik is a former fellow at Oxford and Frankfurt universities and at East-West Centre, Washington. This is an edited reprint of his original article which was published in [The Federal](http://TheFederal.com). Opinions and facts expressed are those of the author and may not reflect the newsletter's position — Editor.)

King's Gambit

Nepal will become a Hindu Rashtra if its monarch returns

Kanak Mani Dixit

IN EARLY March, Kathmandu witnessed largescale violence as activists demanding restoration of monarchy in Nepal breached security cordon, burnt vehicles, destroyed property and looted markets. Security forces responded with tear gas, fired to disperse the protesters and imposed curfew. The unexpected tone of violence — especially the incident where a mob set fire to a building with a television journalist trapped inside — during what was expected to be a routine protest stunned many in Nepal. The K.P. Sharma Oli government was quick to respond, arresting rioters and their

leaders, slapping treason charges. Gyanendra — the former king in whose name the protest was organized — was let off lightly, with Kathmandu's civic body imposing a fine on him for vandalism. It also scaled down his security.

Do people of Nepal want their king back?

There is no evidence that the people want Gyanendra back on the throne. The larger silent majority is certainly not with him. On the whole, the former king



Photo credit: The Kathmandu Post

There is no evidence that the people want Gyanendra back on the throne. The larger silent majority is certainly not with him. his supporters have realized that they are not getting the traction they thought they could generate

and his supporters have realized that they are not getting the traction they thought they could generate. It is not that Nepal's political parties are always doing things right. But people do not see revival of monarchy as the answer. Nepal's youngsters may not know, but the elders have experienced what it was like under monarchy — 'constitutional' or otherwise — which delivered nothing but a closed society, unaccountability, militarism, a police society and corruption.

Moreover, it was Gyanendra who, as king, did the most to bring down the monarchy. This he did by conducting the coup in February 2005 and hence convincing all democratically-minded parties and civil

society that the monarchy was not to be trusted. People also remember the 1960 coup by King Mahendra, which led to 30 years of the autocratic Panchayat system that ended in 1990. Secondly, Gyanendra seems to have been hoping all along that the 'federal,

secular, democratic republic' would fail and he would return to the throne; but ten years into the implementation of the constitution of 2015, he apparently concluded it was getting late, with himself getting on in age.

Who all want monarchy to return?

Gyanendra utilized three categories of individuals: old *panchas* — members of the old Panchayat hierarchy, newborn political opportunists who rely on radical populism and politicians who failed to gain traction in electoral politics. They have tried to use social media to exaggerate the failures of republican governance to claim that Nepal's politicians are destroying social and economic prospects of the people, hoping that a populist surge will bring the constitutional system down.

It would be an exaggeration to say that Gyanendra personally directed the March 28 violence. But it was his chosen lot who carried it out. He was the one who chose the front-rank — the old-time *pancha* Nabaraj Subedi and the rabble-rouser Durga Prasai — as commander. That Gyanendra did not turn to the experienced leadership of the royalist parties such as the RPP (Rastriya



A return to monarchy is actually a demand for dismantling the constitution. Taking away the republic will renege on secularism to allow the formation of a Hindu State

Photo credit: Himel Southasian

Prajatantra Party) and its leader Rajendra Lingden, or Kamal Thapa of the breakaway RPP, meant that he wanted the movement for royalist restoration to run under his own direction rather than through the political parties in parliament.

The motive

Gyanendra's call for a return to monarchy is actually a demand for dismantling the constitution, something that would have grave ramifications through political instability, economic downturn and social polarization. Taking away the republic will also mean reneging on secularism to allow the formation of a Hindu State. People who say that the demand is only for restoration of constitutional monarchy and not for absolute monarchy fail to remember that it was Gyanendra who as constitutional monarch under the 1990 constitution carried out the 2005 coup against parliamentary democracy.

Not once has Gyanendra expressed regret for his 2005 takeover, the jailing of political and civil society leaders and the revocation of parliament. Nor has he ever been

SPECIAL REPORT: NEPAL

accountable for the excesses carried out by the armed forces during the time he ran the government as chairman of the council of ministers. Even today, he and his supporters hope for loyalists within the Nepal army to align with the royalists, which only indicates that they do not have a proper political, demographic or political understanding of Nepal's polity. Theirs is only a hope for revival of lost glory.

The timing of Gyanendra's gambit

On March 24, Nepal's eight democracy activists, including myself, issued a statement which said: "Gyanendra Shah, the former king, has become politically active with the aim of reinstating monarchy in Nepal, which we regard as being against the constitution, aimed at sowing lawlessness for the benefit of opportunists and carried out with the backing of religious fundamentalists in India."



Gyanendra and his followers' desire for a revival of the monarchy is understandable. But the timing is obviously driven by real or perceived desires of the BJP government in New

Gyanendra must have believed that his reception by Indian leaders would give him momentum in Nepal and that such a move would help the BJP's electoral prospects for the upcoming Assembly election in Bihar

Delhi and of a chief minister of a neighbouring Indian state. He must have believed that his reception by the Hindutva forces of India would give him momentum in Nepal. The hope was that such a move would help the BJP's electoral prospects for the upcoming Assembly election in Bihar. Indian television has been carrying Gyanendra on its shoulders, trying to build a narrative of Hindutva wave in Nepal. Much of that is based on wishful thinking of Hindutva activists and political leaders in India who hope to use the former king to propel Nepal back to being declared a Hindu State.

Lived experience indicates that this type of evolution of the Nepali polity suits the BJP/RSS power centres. But Indians will not leave a paper trail and will also be quick to distance themselves if the Gyanendra balloon bursts. The economic blockade imposed in 2015 indicates that India will not desist from using coercive methods on a smaller neighbour to suit its purpose. But at a time when the South Asian neighbourhood is fraught for the Modi government, it will not want to be seen to be interventionist. ●



(Kanak Mani Dixit is a writer, journalist as well as a civil rights and democracy activist. He is the founding editor of Himal Southasian magazine and an active campaigner for subcontinental regionalism. This is an abridged and edited version of his interview published in [Rediff.com](https://www.rediff.com). Opinions and facts expressed are those of the author and may not reflect the newsletter's position — Editor.)

Soft Landing

North East Tour Operators Urge Seamless Entry

Sourabh Sen

NORTH East India is a popular tourist destination. It attracts tourists from all over the world and India for its pristine locales, its wildlife sanctuaries. It is a bird watchers' paradise, an anthropological, religious and socio-cultural treasure trove. But tour operators from northeast complain that a series of administrative and security-related issues make accessing the region difficult not only to domestic, but also to foreign tourists. At the receiving end of these administrative hurdles are tourists, tour operators and communities whose livelihood depends on visitor guests having a seamless travel experience.

Recently, when a group in-bound tourists landed in Nagaland, they were asked to produce their inner line permit. This is a standard requirement and tour operators have no problem with it. The problems lies in the procedure in which this inner-line permit is issued, especially for an in-bound foreign traveller. They have to fill up the form online and can only do so once they land in India and have their passports stamped. Next, they must have an Indian number to get an OTP and proceed to fill up the form and upload documents. They can also use an email ID accessed through a public Wi-Fi or dongle. This process becomes more restrictive for an inbound tourist who is in between connecting flights.



A group of documentary filmmakers from UK faced a similar problem when they wanted to enter Mizoram. Mizoram government officials had no clue as to how to process their entry permit but insisted that visitors must submit the online form on their own. Fortunately, the group had landed in Nagaland first, and eventually could submit the online form for Mizoram, even though the Indian company managing the visit had already secured Inner Line Permits for them from the Mizoram House in Guwahati. In October 2024, the same company had to cancel a large group intending to visit Mizoram for a birding tour, having encountered such hiccups.

“Arunachal Pradesh has stopped issuing PAP. We had a tough time getting the PAP issued. We run several wildlife lodges in the North East, most of which are community-based. If this continues, in-bound visitors from abroad will stop coming and the In-Bound Tour Operators and Foreign Tour Operators will stop promoting such destinations,” says Peter Lobo of Adventure Gurudongma. Incoming tour operators have their apex body Indian Association of Tour Operators (IATO) to advocate these issues with the government. But with no representation of the North East at the IATO national executive committee, murmurs of discontent is brewing inside the organization. ●

(Based in Kolkata, Sourabh Sen writes on politics, foreign affairs and human rights.)

Slow Travel

The Science Behind the Magic

Siddarth Pradhan

THE OLD caravan routes of tourism, those breathless sprints across continents, ticking off landmarks like beads on a rosary, are fading. A new, more contemplative journey is afoot, one that eschews the glossy brochures and the regimented itineraries. It's a retreat into the shadows of the map, to those forgotten outposts where the true heart of a land beats.

Imagine, if you will, a traveller not as a mere spectator, but as a pilgrim, drawn to the flickering lamplight of obscure festivals, seeking not a snapshot, but a communion. They

arrive not to conquer, but to understand, to decipher the subtle language of a people and their place. This is no mere sightseeing, but a slow, deliberate immersion, a peeling back of the layers of time itself.

The modern traveller, armed with a carefully curated list of readings — a

secret dossier of local lore — arrives prepared to engage, to listen, to understand and to appreciate. They seek out the village elders, the artisans, the craftsmen — the keepers of ancient traditions, and they ask direct questions, seeking not the polished facade, but the raw, unvarnished truth. They partake in the local



Weeks Edwin Lord: Arrival of a Caravan outside the city of Morocco



A modern-day traveller

fare, not as a culinary curiosity, but as a vital thread in the tapestry of their lives.

This is not a fleeting affair, but a commitment. It demands a kinship with the land, a respect for its fragile ecosystems, and a willingness to contribute to its preservation. The traveller becomes a temporary custodian, supporting local projects, ensuring that the legacy of a place endures. They are not merely consumers, but participants, their presence a gentle ripple in the stream of time.

This new pilgrimage demands a shift in perception, a willingness to relinquish the familiar comforts of the tourist trail. It requires a patient unravelling of the intricate web of social, economic and environmental factors that shape a community. And it calls for a collaboration, a silent pact between traveller, local guide and the land itself. A journey not of conquest, but of quiet revelation, a rediscovery of the world's hidden corners, and perhaps, of ourselves.

Sikkim: Sacred Grounds

In the hushed, mountain air of Tashiding, where the prayer flags flutter like whispered secrets, there exists a haven known as Rabney Residency. But it is not the sturdy walls, nor the breathtaking vistas, that linger in the traveller's memory. It is the warmth, the almost palpable *karuna*, emanating from its proprietor Nima Lhamu.

Her care transcends the mere provision of lodging. It is a mother's embrace, a silent understanding of the weary soul. She anticipates needs before they are spoken, fulfilling promises with a quiet, unwavering resolve. And then, there are those moments, those acts of grace that defy the rigid protocols of even the most opulent establishments.

Imagine, if you will, a weary traveller arriving in the dead of night, the clock striking the ungodly hour of two. The biting mountain chill seeps into the bones, and the spirit is dampened by the long, arduous journey. Yet, there, in the soft glow of Rabney Residency, Nima Lhamu awaits, a steaming dinner laid out, and a smile that could melt the harshest winter. It is a smile that renders the starched formality of five-star service utterly inadequate, a smile that speaks of a deeper, more profound connection.

And nestled within this sanctuary is Sacred Grounds, her in-house bakery, where the aroma of freshly baked bread mingles with the scent of mountain herbs, creating a balm





for the senses. It is here, amidst the warmth of the oven and the gentle murmur of conversation, that one truly understands the essence of Nima Lhamu's hospitality. It is not a transaction, but a gift, a selfless offering of comfort and care, a testament to the enduring power of human kindness in the remote, sacred corners of the world.

In the verdant folds of Rinchenpong, West Sikkim, where the air hums with the ancient rhythms of the land, lies Yangsum Farm. A place steeped in history, its roots reaching back to 1833, reborn in 1966 and nurtured by the hands of Thendup, a son of the soil. He and his wife, Pema, custodians of this 44-acre paradise, have woven a tapestry of hospitality that echoes the very soul of the region.

Thendup, a man of the earth, hails from a lineage of farmers, their hands skilled in coaxing life from the rich, dark soil. Their farm, a testament to generations of toil and wisdom, stands as a beacon of village tourism, a pioneering venture that has drawn travellers to this remote corner of the Himalayas.

Within the walls of their kitchen, a wood fire crackles, its warmth infusing the air with the tantalizing aroma of local delicacies. Here, Pema conjures feasts that speak of

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the land, of the seasons, of the very essence of Sikkim. The farm itself becomes a living classroom, an immersive experience where guests partake in the rhythms of rural life, guided by the very villagers who call this place home.

The trails leading to the Resum Gompa, perched high upon the hill, become pathways to spiritual awakening, each step a communion with the ancient energies of the land. And when the midday sun casts its languid spell, the bamboo grove offers a sanctuary, a place for sinful siestas. As dusk descends, a bonfire crackles, casting flickering shadows that dance to the rhythm of the traditional Limbu dance, a vibrant expression of the region's rich cultural heritage. And when dawn breaks, and the first rays of sunlight paint the majestic Kanchenjunga in hues of gold and rose, the garden awakens with a symphony of birdsong, a chorus that heralds the start of another magical day.

Every moment at Yangsum Farm is a brushstroke on the canvas of memory, a fleeting experience that etches itself into the soul, a reminder of the enduring beauty of the Himalayas, and the boundless generosity of its people. It is a place where time slows, and the spirit finds solace, a place where the magic of Sikkim lingers long after the

The hushed sanctity of a Sikkimese monastery — the unscripted experience of a place where air thrums with ancient chants and the scent of incense — lingers in our memory long after the journey has ended

journey ends.

The rigid itinerary, the relentless march from one designated landmark to the next, often blinds the traveller to the true heart of a land. It is in the unscheduled detours, the impulsive stops at roadside *dhabas*, where the veil of the tourist trail is lifted, revealing the raw, unvarnished beauty of everyday life. And Sikkim, with its winding mountain roads and hidden valleys, offers a treasure trove of such serendipitous encounters.

One such encounter, etched itself indelibly into the memories of those who experienced it. A humble *dhaba*, perched on the edge of a mountain road, offered respite from the journey. And there, a young lass, with a smile as bright as the Himalayan sun, prepared *mimi alu dum*, a local delicacy. But it was not merely the dish itself that captivated the travellers; it was the simple act of witnessing her venture into her own backyard garden, plucking fresh coriander from its verdant bed.

BACK OF THE BOOK

The vibrant green of those freshly harvested leaves, scattered across the fiery red of the *alu dum*, became a symbol of the region's untainted beauty, a testament to the connection between the people and the land. It was a moment of pure, unadulterated authenticity, a fleeting glimpse into a life lived in harmony with nature. And it was this simple, unscripted experience, this taste of the true Sikkim, that lingered in their memories long after the journey ended.

The hushed sanctity of a Sikkimese monastery, a place where the air thrums with ancient chants and the scent of incense, was disrupted by an unexpected sight: a constellation of young lamas, their faces illuminated not by the glow of prayer candles, but by the flickering screens of their handheld devices. The digital world, it seemed, had breached even these remote bastions of spiritual contemplation.

A guest, grappling with the incongruity of the scene, dared to pose the question to the gampa abbot, a figure of serene authority. The silence that followed stretched, heavy with unspoken contemplation, as if the very stones of the monastery held their breath.

Then, slowly, deliberately, the abbot spoke, his voice a low, resonant murmur that



Young novices, the abbot explained, were not immune to the allure of the digital age. But rather than condemn, the abbot spoke of the potential for these devices to become tools for spiritual growth

filled the chamber. He acknowledged the dualistic nature of existence, the inherent tension between tradition and modernity. Young novices, he explained, were not immune to the allure of the digital age, their lives a delicate

balancing act between the ancient teachings and the modern world.

But rather than condemn, the abbot sought understanding, a path towards integration. He spoke of the potential for these devices to become tools for spiritual growth, conduits for the dissemination of Dharma. Sermons, commentaries, *sutras* — all could be accessed with a touch, transforming a source of potential distraction into a wellspring of wisdom.

He cautioned against the facile comparisons often drawn between generations, the nostalgic lament for a supposedly purer past. Instead, he urged a pragmatic approach, a mindful utilization of technology, a harnessing of its power for the greater good. The mobile phone, he suggested, could become an instrument for deepening understanding, a means of connecting with the teachings in a way that resonated with the modern mind.

It was a measured response, a quiet acceptance of the inevitable, and a call to find wisdom in the midst of change.

THE FRENETIC pace of modern travel, a blur of airports and fleeting snapshots, is yielding to a more contemplative rhythm. Slow travel, a quiet rebellion against the tyranny of the timetable, is gaining ground, drawing wanderers to the hidden corners of the world, where time itself seems to linger.

It is a journey not of conquest, but of discovery, a patient unravelling of the unknown. It bestows allure upon the overlooked, a name upon the nameless, and a platform for the whispers of wisdom that rise from the very earth. All that is required is a slowing down, a deliberate relinquishing of the need to rush, to consume experiences like fast food.

Alight from the well-trodden paths, and you will find yourself immersed in a symphony of subtle sensations. Listen to the rustling leaves, the murmur of a village stream, the cadence of a local dialect. These are the whispers of wisdom, the quiet pronouncements of a land that has endured, that has witnessed the ebb and flow of generations.

Slow travel is an invitation to engage with the world on a deeper level, to connect with the people and places that shape our planet. It encourages us to shed our



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preconceptions, to embrace the unexpected and to find beauty in the ordinary. It is a journey of self-discovery, a pilgrimage into the heart of what truly motivates us to explore.

It is in these moments of stillness, these pauses in the relentless rush of modern life, that we find the true essence of travel. It is in the quiet contemplation of a sunset over a remote mountain range, in the shared meal with a local family, in the stories whispered around a crackling bonfire, that we discover the profound beauty of the world, and the enduring power of human connection.

That, my dear, is the magic behind the science of Slow Travel!!! ●

(Siddarth Pradhan is a Kalimpong based tourism and marketing expert, destination developer and a sustainable tourism honcho. He specializes in rural mountain and hills tourism, wildlife, destination marketing and travel management. He has an MBA from NIS (Sparta) and has vast operations experience, especially in the Himalayas.)

Living Simple

Return to Roots with Yoga, Ayurveda and Daily Rituals

Vivek Gaur

IN THE fast-paced world we live in, the pursuit of wellness has become more crucial than ever. While modern solutions often promise quick fixes, true well-being comes from a more grounded approach — one that has been embedded in the heart of Indian traditions for centuries. The philosophy of yoga, the wisdom of Ayurveda and the simplicity of rural Indian habits offer a path that nurtures both the body and the mind.

The harmony of yoga: Uniting body, mind and spirit

Yoga, a practice originating from ancient India, is far beyond a series of postures and stretches. It is a holistic discipline that aligns physical health with mental clarity and



Rooted in the principle of *Samatvam* or balance, yoga teaches us to cultivate inner peace amidst life's inevitable ups and downs

spiritual grounding. Rooted in the principle of *Samatvam* or balance, yoga teaches us to cultivate inner peace amidst life's inevitable ups and downs.

In rural India, yoga is often practiced at sunrise, aligning one's energy with the natural rhythm of the day. Simple stretches, mindful breathing (*pranayama*) and meditative reflection are a common morning ritual, setting a calm and composed tone for the day. Practicing just a few minutes of yoga each day can enhance flexibility, improve respiratory health and reduce stress.

Practical Tips:

- Start with joint movements and light warm up
- Begin with Surya Namaskar (Sun Salutation), a 12-step sequence that offers a full-body workout while expressing gratitude to the sun — a practice as old as Indian civilization itself
- Followed by leg raising or Sarvangasan (Inverted)
- Practice Kapalbhati, Anulom-Vilom for few minutes each
- Finish with Shavasana/meditation or Bhramari Pranaya

Ayurvedic diet: Nourishing from within

Ayurveda, often referred to as the science of life, emphasizes a personalized approach to nutrition based on one's *dosha* (body constitution). The three doshas — *Vata*, *Pitta*, and *Kapha* — govern physical and mental characteristics. Understanding your *dosha* can guide you in making dietary choices that enhance your well-being.

In rural Indian homes, meals are simple yet nourishing, often prepared using seasonal and locally sourced ingredients. Fresh vegetables, lentils, rice and whole grains

Practical Tips

Start your day with a glass of warm water infused with lemon or ginger to aid digestion

Include spices like turmeric, cumin and coriander in your meals for their anti-inflammatory properties

Embrace a plant-rich diet, including lentils, vegetables and whole grains

Eat little less than your full stomach

Consume fresh buttermilk or lassi after meals to enhance gut health.

Sip on a warm glass of turmeric milk before bed. This age-old remedy boosts immunity and promotes restful sleep



are staples. Spices like turmeric, cumin and coriander are not just for flavour; they possess medicinal properties that aid digestion and immunity.

In rural communities, meals are often cooked using earthen pots, which retain nutrients and impart a distinct flavour. While it may not be practical for all, opting for traditional cookware like iron or clay can be a valuable choice. Prefer

open cooking over pressure cooker cooking.

Daily hygiene and rituals: Aligning with nature

Personal hygiene in Indian culture has always been deeply linked to wellness. Bathing rituals, often with herbal powders or neem leaves, cleanse not only the body but also the mind. In villages, people still prefer using natural ingredients like chickpea flour (*besan*) and yogurt for skin care — a sustainable and chemical-free alternative. Oiling the hair on regular interval is also necessary. Washing hair with essence of *reetha* (soap nut) is very good. *Multani mitti* (Fuller's Earth or Yellow Earth powder) to wash skin and hair is also good. Use the water for bathing as per temperature around. Body temperature water is always recommended.

Dinacharya: The rhythm of a balanced life

The concept of *Dinacharya* (daily routine) in Ayurveda underscores the importance of aligning our activities with the natural cycles of the day. Rural India reflects this

wisdom beautifully, with villagers rising at dawn, working in harmony with nature and winding down with the setting sun.

Adoptable Daily Practices:

- **Wake with the Sun:** Rising early rejuvenates the body and mind. Begin your day with a moment of gratitude and a few minutes of deep breathing.
- **Oil Pulling:** Swish a tablespoon of sesame or coconut oil in your mouth for 10-15 minutes. This ancient practice supports oral hygiene and detoxifies the body.
- **Self-Massage (*Abhyanga*):** Before showering, massage your body with warm oil to nourish the skin and improve circulation.
- **Mindful Eating:** Avoid distractions while eating. Savour each bite and chew slowly to promote digestion.
- **Wind Down:** As the day concludes, reduce screen time and unwind with herbal teas like chamomile or *tulsi*.

Sleep and rest: Following the sun's cycle



Practical Tips

- A warm foot massage with sesame oil before bed can calm the nervous system and improve sleep quality.
- One can also simply keep lower legs in salty lukewarm water for five minutes followed by washing with cold water and dried with towel. Raise both legs with the wall while lying on the bed for few minutes and then go to sleep. It helps in releasing all tension and tiredness of the day, initiates better blood circulation in legs and foot and a sound sleep.

In rural India, the day typically begins at dawn and ends shortly after sunset, reflecting the natural cycle of light and darkness. This circadian alignment ensures optimal rest and rejuvenation. Ayurveda recommends going to bed by 10 pm and rising before sunrise for enhanced vitality.

Reducing screen time in the evening and engaging in calming activities like reading or gentle stretching can further promote better sleep. Creating a night-time routine with a cup of herbal tea or practicing guided meditation can calm the mind and prepare the body for restful sleep.

In rural India, amidst fields of golden crops or under a starlit sky, moments of calm are abundant. You too can cultivate this peace through simple

practices like meditation, journaling or spending time in nature.

Consider dedicating a few minutes each day to deep reflection. Light a *diya* (oil lamp) in the evening, chant a *mantra*, or simply observe your breath. This sacred pause nurtures resilience and inner peace.

Emotional and social well-being: The role of community



A sense of community is integral to well-being. Sharing meals, engaging in group activities and celebrating festivals together foster emotional resilience. This connection reminds us that wellness is not merely a solitary pursuit but a collective experience.

Practicing gratitude, spending time in nature and nurturing meaningful relationships are all ways to cultivate emotional health. Simple acts of kindness and offering help within the community nourish the soul and bring joy.

Practical Tip

- Consider maintaining a gratitude journal. Writing down three things you are thankful for each day can shift your perspective and improve mental well-being.

Returning to simplicity

The wisdom of yoga, *Ayurveda*, and traditional Indian practices teaches us that wellness is not about complexity; it's about returning to simplicity. By listening to our bodies, aligning with nature and by embracing mindful rituals, we can experience a more profound sense of health and happiness.

Incorporate these time-tested habits into your life gradually. Whether it is starting your day with a few minutes of yoga, savouring a freshly cooked Ayurvedic meal, or winding down with a mindful evening routine, each small step brings you closer to a balanced and joyful life. Let the ancient wisdom of India guide you on your journey to wellness — a journey of self-care, self-awareness and true inner harmony. ●



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